Signs, translation and life in the Bakhtin circle and in Welby's significs¹

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Abstract

"Significs" is provisionally defined by Welby (1911: vii, in Petrilli 2009: 256) as the study of the nature of significance in all its forms and relationships, of its workings in all spheres of human life and knowledge. Considering "significs" as a movement highlighting significance, Welby explores the action of signs in life; and more than the Saussurean sign composed of signifier and signified, the sign as understood by Welby refers to meaning as generated through signs in motion. This notion of "significs" empowers the study of signs when it considers the sign not in terms of the Saussurean structural representation of the union of the concept and acoustic image, but as (responsive and responsible) sign action in the world, in life. This also means to take into account the "extra-linguistic referent" (translinguistic and transdiscursive character of significs), history (space-time), subjectivity, the architecture of values connected to language, their communicative function. We believe that a dialogue can be established between Welby's vision of significs and the notion of ideological sign proposed by Vološinov in *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, expanding the notions of "meaning" and "sense".

Sense? What is Sense and what do we mean by it? Seeing and hearing and smelling and touching? Or what belongs to words and phrases? Or the quality which we so value in each other when we say with relief, that is a man of sense, that was a sensible thing to do, I can see the sense of that? Or that subtle thing which we call the sense of a meeting, the sense of disapproval, the sense of duty, the religious or philosophical sense of an age or race? When this question was first put, a protest was raised against there being any traceable connection between the "sense of touch" and the "sense of a word". (...) So when we ask what Sense is, there may be some new answers to be given. We want men of sense in a new sense. (Welby 1897: 7-8, in Petrilli 2009: 101-102)

On the sign in Bakhtin and Welby

In *Links and Clues*, 1881, Welby considers it important to acknowledge the sign's place and value in the world. In the project of the philosopher and significian of prime importance is the search for unity between religion and all aspects of human social and cultural activities. Welby privileges the epistolary genre as the place of encounter and confrontation of ideas. Beginning from her reflections on the sacred scriptures she not only explores religious discourse in her exchanges with others, issues connected with theology, but extends her gaze to a broad range of different fields and spheres of knowledge – philosophy, language studies, general science, mathematics, hermeneutics, translation, semiotics, semantics, education, sociology, anthropology, etc. Welby encourages the exchange of ideas through confrontation among different voices in her quest for knowledge, where dialogism and critique are necessary elements in the acquisition of responsive understanding about the significance of human behaviour.

When reading texts by Lady Welby and by members of the Bakhtin circle, such notions as "sense," "meaning" and "significance" do not emerge as definitely fixed abstract notions, but acquire sense in the light of the overall interpretive structure of their works.

Supposing that we personified Nature in a scientific sense, postulating her as a unified series of impressions, would she now be found speaking of us in a metaphor as we of her, only with speech reversed? That is, would her every "word" be taken metaphorically from the action or process of consciousness, reason, reflection, judgment? Thus might we not say that motion, and mass, and the so-called matter assumed as behind them, are as full of mind-metaphor as mind is of matter-metaphor; the mind-metaphor arising in the conscious world, and reaching us through intelligence, and intellect, as matter-metaphor arises in the unconscious world, and reaches us through sense? (Welby 1911: 46)

When thinking about the functioning of metaphorical language studied by Welby, we observe that the sense of "nature" makes sense only when it is said in relation to "science". We enclose the notion of nature in scientific postulates and agree that everything in the world is made of material physical chemistry. However, metaphoric language is connected with the human gaze on life, to the very embodiment of symbiosis, or rather to the "semiosis" of life, to evoke Bakhtin and Vološinov.

With Welby and the Bakhtin circle we propose to think about signs more decisively in the direction of the action of signs in life and language. We view language as a multifaceted human activity that mediates the relationship between man in

contemporaneity and in history: language and sense evolve dynamically through signs so that meaning is never fixed once and for all, but is generated in the relation among signs and interlocutors. Both Welby and Bakhtin/Voloshinov are critical of the concept of plain, obvious and fixed meaning; instead, sense evolves constantly in language, despite what would appear to be a condition of relative stability. This becomes clear when considering Bakhtin's "unclassifiable thought," as proposed by Paula and Stafuzza (2010, "Preface" in volume 1 of the Series *Bakhtin - Inclassificável*, organized by the authors).

Welby and Bakhtin² believe that the subject develops consciousness and expressivity through a process of continuous "translation". This is particularly evident, for instance, with a foreigner. When the individual arrives in another country, he must not only "translate" the other's language, but he must also "translate" the other, the stranger in socio-cultural terms. When this same person returns to the country of origin, he is no longer the same, and again he must "translate" – "I-for-myself", "I-for-the other", and "other-for-me", in Bakhtin's terminology (developed in *Toward a philosophy of the act* [Brazilian version, *Para uma filosofia do ato responsável*, 2010]). To evoke Welby:

While man fails to make this translation – to moralise and humanise his knowledge of the cosmos, and so to unify and relate it to himself – his thinking is in arrears, and mentally he lags behind his enacted experience. That we in this age do lag behind, and that we have thus far failed to achieve a great ad general act of translation, is a loss chiefly due to our unanimous neglect to understand Expression, its nature, conditions, range of form and function, unrealized potencies and full value or worth. (Welby 1911: 3)

To translate a language means to interpret meaning networks in which subjects, societies and cultures take shape and in turn contribute to engendering. From this point of view, to talk about language separately from culture is impossible, and here lies a key issue for translation: we do not translate the foreign language, but rather we translate the other (subject and culture which is social and linguistic).

According to Welby and Bakhtin's conception, the translation process involves issues of otherness in dialogical relationships between the translated sign (foreign language, for example), or interpreted sign and the sign which translates (the linguistic and non-linguistic consciousness of foreign languages), the interpretant. Like Welby, Bakhtin notes the importance of looking at a sign system through the eyes of another sign system (referring also to the relationship between verbal and non-verbal signs, as in

the case of the transposition of non-verbal signs of carnival into the verbal signs of carnivalized literature), of looking at a particular language through the eyes of others, at a particular discourse genre with reference to another (see Petrilli 2009: 540-541). Therefore, the role of translation is fundamental in the constitution of the sign, verbal and nonverbal, in the generation of meaning. To explain this Bakhtin (in *Estétique de la création verbale*, 1979 [Brazilian version *Estética da criação verbal*, 1997]), proposes the notion of exotopy, he thematizes the extralocalized look of the subject toward itself and the other in relations that are dialogic and never of total convergence (of total symbiosis).

Meaning can be defined as a material class of verbal and non-verbal signs that reciprocally replace each another, so that each term is either an interpretant sign or an interpreted sign of the other, depending on signifying context. In this sense, a sign is always interpreted as other, thanks to the interpretant sign which translates and updates the interpreted sign's meaning.

According to Bakhtin/Vološinov,

How, in fact, is another speaker's speech received? What is the mode of existence of another's utterance in the actual, inner-speech consciousness of the recipient? How is it manipulated there, and what process of orientation will the subsequent speech of the recipient himself have undergone in regard to it?

What we have in the forms of reported speech is precisely an objective document of this reception. Once we have learned to decipher it, this document provides us with information, not about accidental and mercurial subjective psychological processes in the "soul" of the recipient, but about steadfast social tendencies in an active reception of other speakers' speech, tendencies that have crystallized into language forms. The mechanism of this process is located, not in the individual soul, but in society it is the function of society to select and to make grammatical (adapt to the grammatical structure of its language) just those factors in the active and evaluative reception of utterances that are socially vital and constant and, hence, that are grounded in the economic existence of the particular community of speakers. (Bakhtin/Vološinov 1986 [1929]: 117)

The dialogic conception of language, a central concept in the Bakhtin Circle, keeps account of the social and ideological character of utterance expression and the subject's mental activity. Understanding in the world takes place in immediate social situations and in the larger social environment through processes of materialization and realization of signs and language in processes of *verbal interaction* and expression.

Like the double-faced Janus, expression has two faces, that turned toward the inside – designed by consciousness – and the other toward the outside, towards the other, whether the other of self or of the other beyond self. The theory of expression inevitably presupposes a certain dualism between inside and outside. Indeed, language

and expression according to Welby develop through ongoing translation processes between inside and outside, inner and outer in signifying processes that are ever more complex and multifaceted, ever more empowered in terms of sense, meaning and significance.

For both Bakhtin and Welby mental activity, language and articulate expression at large shape and determine each other in immediate social situations. Thus the utterance is the product of the interaction among socially organized individuals who express themselves in specific or singular ways (the utterance act).

According to Vološinov:

(...) some kind of semiotic material, that sign bears upon sign, that consciousness itself can arise and become a viable fact only in the material embodiment of signs. The understanding of a sign is, after all, an act of reference between the sign apprehended and other, already known signs; in other words, understanding is a response to a sign with signs. And this chain of ideological creativity and understanding, moving from sign to link of a semiotic nature (hence, also of a material nature) we proceed uninterruptedly to another link of exactly the same nature. And nowhere is there a break in the chain, nowhere does the chain plunge into inner being, nonmaterial in nature and unembodied in signs.

This ideological chain stretches from individual consciousness to individual consciousness, connecting them together. Signs emerge, after all, only in the process of interaction between one individual consciousness and another. And the individual consciousness itself is filled with signs. Consciousness becomes consciousness only once it has been filled with ideological (semiotic) content, consequently, only in the process of social interaction. (Vološinov 1986 [1929]: 11, italics by the author)

The word – in its interlocutory function – is directed toward an interlocutor and varies depending on the social group it is designed for (whether higher or lower in the social hierarchy). Therefore, understanding the signs that pervade and constitute the word in the act of interlocution also depends on the socialization of these signs. The sign AIDS, for example, can be understood in the contemporary world as a manageable disease, where people can live an apparently normal life, accomplish their social tasks, their goals. However, when we look across most of the 20th century, the sign AIDS meant social death of the subject. Today AIDS is socially manageable thanks to progress in scientific research and extensive campaigning to publicize results so that everyone, worldwide, can have an understanding of the findings: and yet prejudice prevails.

Welby considers use of the terms "inside" and "outside" as metaphors for "mental" and "physical" (see Chapters VII and IX in *Significs and Language*). According to Welby (1911: 22-23), we express ourselves through images and metaphors, analogies

and associations, and often we do so unconsciously: "inside" is used to define "mental" and "outside" defines "physical". We speak about a mental world and we invent "mental eyes" as a way of representing the "introspective method".

When Vološinov (1986 [1929]) in the Chapter "Verbal Interaction" brings up the theory of expression, he acknowledges that everything formed and determined in some way in the psyche of the individual externalizes itself objectively for others with the help of some code from external signs. This means that the metaphorical representations of language described by Welby with the terms "inside" and "outside" can be associated to assumptions made by Bakhtin and Vološinov to theorize about verbal interaction: "inside" and "outside" reveal interdependent processes of signifying the world, of giving meaning to life, of conferring sense on the action of signs in the world. There is no mental activity without social conditioning. The most immediate social situation and the broader social milieu determine the structure of the utterance in processes where the relation between "inside" and "outside" are dialogic, and not where one of these terms dominates over the other in any final sense.

Bakhtin and Vološinov seem to exemplify what Welby (1911) postulates:

A few examples may here be noted of a kind of metaphorical usage which oftener tends to throw dust in our eyes than to throw light on any subject, starting as it does from veiled fallacy or false assumption, now discredited by growing experience or widening and increasingly exact knowledge.

As we have already seen, the use of Internal and External, Inner and Outer, Within and Without, Inside and Outside, as means of contrasting mind and body, consciousness and nature, psychical and physical, thought and reality, is radically misleading. So also is the use of basis and foundation to express a primary or ultimate need; and, in lesser degree, the use of ground and root for the same purpose. The first introduces in all sorts of connections the fallacies of primitive cosmogony. 'Ground' is only needed for standing, walking, dancing upon; for planting in or building or mining, very rarely for grasping or holding. Roots, again, only belong to a plant stage of existence, and are sent down to obtain nourishment and give a grip, or hold, for the plant. Yet all these are used indiscriminately as though they covered or illustrated the whole range of accessible realities and characteristic experiences of Man. There is, in fact, the whole scheme of material, substantial, static analogy and metaphor for the psychical or mental or intellectual (or 'spiritual') sphere. (Welby 1911: 26-27)

Time, space and ideological orientation are factors that come into play in meaning and sense as determined through our use of metaphorical language. The sense, meaning and significance of the verbal sign "land", for example, is dynamic and changes according to verbal interaction and context. "Land" in itself may signify a universal idea of absolutism, in a strictly limited sense. However, when we enhance its signifying value by adding certain elements of contextual interaction, its meanings change and develop: "land" for the farmer, "land" for the Movement of Landless Rural Workers;

"land" to the slave; "land" for the foreigner; "land" to the nationalist. In all these cases, the effect of giving images to contextual sense is that these images take their distance from the idea of the universal and acquire specific sense and value.

Bakhtin and Vološinov's notion of the ideological sign can be related to Welby's thinking on the issue of image:

Any ideological product is not only itself a part of a reality (natural or social), just as is any physical body, any instrument of production, or any product for consumption, it also, in contradistinction to these other phenomena, reflects and refracts another reality outside itself. Everything ideological possesses *meaning*: it represents, depicts, or stands for something lying outside itself. In other words, it is a *sign*. Without signs there is no ideology. A physical body equals itself, so to speak; it does not signify anything but wholly coincides with its particular, given nature. In this case there is no question of ideology.

However, any physical body may be perceived as an image; for instance, the image of natural inertia and necessity embodied in that particular thing. Any such artistic-symbolic image to which a particular physical object gives rise is already an ideological product. The physical object is converted into a sign. Without ceasing to be a part of material reality, such an object, to some degree, reflects and refracts another reality. (Vološinov 1986 [1929]: 9, italics by the author)

Considering ideology as a constituent part of the sign, Vološinov (1986 [1929]) repeatedly underlines that meaning occurs and develops in social interaction: the action of the sign in the social world as theorized by Bakhtin and Vološinov in the framework of their philosophy of language approximates Welby's significal thinking. Besides conceptualizing language in terms of activity and function, recognizing the role of context in communicative interaction, and developing the theory of meaning in terms of cognitive therapy, Welby also recognizes the central importance of analogy, association and similarity in the relation between communication and linguistic structure. Welby's work helps to evidence the most complex levels of meaning, expression and communication without reducing them to the status of mere transmission of information and messages.

The social architecture of signs and sense

As clearly emerges with significs the construction of sense takes place in the movement of history, society, culture and language. Therefore we will now attempt to analyze the sign "skull" and the sign "AIDS", noting their place and value in human life and thought processes, that is, in the social architecture of life, of humanity.

Skull: a dialogue between the iconic and the symbolic

The skull is the bone structure of the human head with a cavity that receives the brain. It consists of two parts: the skull and lower jaw, without the jaw, the skull is only a skull. The skull serves as a protection for the man's brain, it fixes the distance between the eyes to allow stereoscopic vision, and defines the distance between the ears to help the brain use auditory cues to judge direction and distance of sounds. Why can this structure of the human body generally be associated with symbol representations of death and fear?

The human skull symbolizes, in general, the perishable and transitory nature of existence. It can also refer to the idea that we are mortal and consequently that we should fully enjoy life, bravely accepting our fate.

So, the skull is a representative symbol for various groups, social trends and tribes (in music: rock, heavy metal, punk; in different social groups: goths, motorcyclists, metalheads, masonry; still print flags of pirate ships; labels to indicate poison; to signal dangerous areas such as the electric field, indicating a high voltage and hence risk of death etc.). Thus, depending on the context in which they are produced, the meaning of the skull in such dialogues between the iconic and symbolic varies.

The skull is interpreted as a non-verbal sign in a signifying network in dialogue with context and its actors, for example: i) the skull tattooed on a prisoner, ii) the skull on labels indicating poison that can be fatal to humans; iii) the skull painted on plates to signal risk areas. These examples are representative of the sense of death that the sign skull may represent. We see in these examples, the sense of danger, "do not come close" or "be careful", without many other meanings.

However, the skull can also symbolize the opposite of death or the overcoming of death in life: i) the skull ring of masonry; ii) in Brazil, the symbol of the BOPE (Special Operations Battalion) is a skull with a knife across its skull, and the expression "knife in the skull" was popularized by the movie *Tropa de Elite* (2007), directed by José Padilha. This is the representative symbol of the special operations units and of command courses held by the Brazilian army; iii) a skull printed on jackets of motorcycle groups. In these examples, the skull signifies life over death thereby reinforcing the sense of survival and combat, sacrifice in the face of adversity, victory of life over death.

Socially, the skull can still have the meaning of protest against injustice, inequality, racial, social, and religious prejudice since the skull as a representation of death, equalizes all men: if death is certain, all inequities that men suffer should be extinguished, as in heavy metal rock. Another issue is the symbolism of the skull in its current commercial use: in a capitalist economy, the skull becomes a fashionable consumer item on shirts, pants, jewelry, shoes. At a surface level the skull leaves the *underground* universe to enter the pop universe of mass culture. The skull appears on rings, necklaces with pendants, and other dress accessories. In Latin America the spreading fashion, almost a fever among young people is to tattoo the Mexican skull on their bodies. This particular skull is colorful, cheerful and conveys a sense of celebration with the function of remembering that social differences mean nothing, that people are equal before death. At the same time, it has become a consumption item for sales, the skull capitalized.

Moreover, skulls have an important place in historical and cultural tradition generally as the subject of the great masters of Renaissance painting, the art of the Church, as a symbol of armies, legions and battalions throughout European history, etc.

Therefore considering ideology as a constituent part of the sign "skull" (Vološinov 1986 [1929]), the significance of this sign occurs, develops and changes in social interaction, in the action of the sign in the social world. The sign "skull", with its multiple meanings, testifies to the impossibility of treating signs and language separately from the specific context of cultures and societies. The image of the skull as an ideological sign is a good example of dialogue between the iconic and symbolic, since the sign "skull" is not simply a "bare head" or "skeleton of the head". As an ideological sign, the image of the skull goes beyond its physical-biological function. In the iconic and symbolic world, it is converted into pain, suffering, death, overcoming death, loved by some, feared by others. There is a construction of feelings that go through the sign "skull," which no longer define it, but exploit in a movement of significance, this is "Significs".

Such considerations create a dialogue between Bakhtin and Welby, since verbal language as a conventional system is based on an iconic method. Therefore, we observe the crucial role performed by the development of iconic semiosis – whether verbal, nonverbal or syncretic. On analyzing the verbal sign "skull", metaphorical expressions

have emerged that echo studies on metaphorical language in Welby (1897; 1911) and evidence the architectural action of signs in social life. Here are some examples: i) "he is a skull" in the sense of a very thin man; ii) "make someone's skull", meaning "to plot", "make negative comments", "make people dislike other"; iii) "fill the skull" in order to get drunk. We cannot tell how much sense these expressions make in other languages, however, in the portughuese language of Brazil, their use is recurrent and found in dictionaries. Popular expressions are representative ways of meaning the historical, social, ideological and cultural aspects of language in the development of verbal and vocal semiosis.

As an iconic-symbolic representation the skull is at once a particular physical object transformed into an ideological product. The physical object is converted into a sign and enters the social architecture of sense and significance and (like all existing signs) never ceases to be a part of material reality because of this. In Bakhtinian terminology the sign "reflects and refracts" another "reality" thereby constituting us as subjects in life and language.

Context of AIDS in Philadelphia (1993)

Philadelphia is an American film produced in 1993, directed by Jonathan Demme, which tells the story of Andrew Beckett (played by Tom Hanks), a promising young lawyer whose career is interrupted when he is fired by a prestigious law. The company claimed that his work was not satisfactory. However, Andrew knows that the real reason for dismissal is the fact that he had AIDS. Determined to defend his dignity and professional reputation, Andrew hires a lawyer, Joe Miller (played by Denzel Washington), to sue his former employers for the unfair dismissal. Initially, Joe resists accepting the case because, despite his having grown up knowing the pain of prejudice, he had never faced his own prejudices against homosexuality and AIDS. Speaking of Philadelphia, verbovocovisual film (Pignatari 2005) features these two men, Andrew and Joe, who start a social (and historical) fight against intolerance and ignorance of society towards this disease. Andrew fights for his reputation, his life and for justice, while Joe struggles to confront his own fears and prejudices as well as those of the society he lives in.

The sign of AIDS in the context of the film *Philadelphia* means social death. This issue reflects the collective imagination of the people who did not have (or still do not have) a clear understanding about the disease and about the precautions to avoid contagion. Andrew, the young gay lawyer suffering from AIDS, is marginalized in the public space when the law firm where he worked discovers his illness. The dynamics is the same as occurred with people suffering from leprosy in antiquity, when patients were discriminated and put away from social life. This is no longer the case in contemporary society thanks to progress in modern medicine, constant social educational campaigns and struggle against prejudice which have revealed that healing is possible. The meanings that construct the sign AIDS in *Philadelphia* are mainly representative of the social mentality of the time: the aim is to marginalize, segregate, isolate, prevent people sick with AIDS from participating in society, given that they represent a threat for healthy people and warning sign of certain death.

Given that the carrier of AIDS is marginalized as a potential transmitter to others, in *Philadelphia* the sign AIDS reveals a sense of social death: the legal case promoted by attorney Joe Miller to seek justice for Andrew a case of social injustice due to the lack of knowledge about AIDS. This case reveals the phobia, fear and hatred felt by society towards the infected, considered doubly damned: for carrying the disease and for being homosexual.

When thinking about the sign of AIDS, its sense must respond to an immediate social situation (the film *Philadelphia*) in a broader social context (social and historical pathways of the disease from *Philadelphia* today, year 2012, 21th century, almost 20 years later). The sense and significance of the sign AIDS has been constructed socially and historically across various phases: its discovery, the evolution of research on the disease by medicine, prevention, treatment, educational campaigns about the disease, by changing the bias understanding of the disease. The meanings of the sign AIDS in *Philadelphia*, 1993, relate to the sense and significance of "malignancy", "homosexual disease", "disease infectious", "STD"; but in the late '90s, the sign AIDS brings still other senses including "treatable disease", "stable disease".

Therefore, the verbovocovisual language of *Philadelphia* develops senses about AIDS which from the point of view of interlocutory function address the interlocutor and vary depending on the social group to which they refer. In the case of this film, the

sign AIDS appears under the aegis of prejudice, fear and social phobia. So, the meanings of signs pervade and constitute verbovocovisual language in the act of interlocution, depending upon the socialization of the senses of those signs.

The sign AIDS with its meanings constructed and transformed throughout history shows that it is impossible to speak about language without speaking about the social. The photograph of the young David Kirby, Ohio, USA, carrier of AIDS, made by Teresa Frare in 1990, eventually became the most representative picture of the disease. While the picture was critically acclaimed and received numerous awards (the World Press Photo in 1991), Kirby died, in April 1990. The picture was published in November 1990, by *LIFE* magazine³. In 1992, winning fame and interpreted as the iconic image of AIDS, the publicist Oliviero Toscani made an advertisement campaign for United Colors of Benetton: Kirby's family around his body on the bed, consumed by the disease, in an image that records the despair of the family.

This transformation of the photograph on AIDS shows how the meaning of a sign can be shifted in terms of signifying value and ideology: the (ideological) sign AIDS with its initial meaning signaling sickness and social marginalization is converted into media material promoting fashion and socialization. The sense, meaning and significance of signs and subjects is never exhausted showing how the quest for "Significs" moves man's expression in action and act, creation and invention (Welby 1911: VII-IX).

Conclusion

With her focus on significance, Welby considers the action of signs in life. Her significs empowers and amplifies semiotic studies that consider the sign as value-driven action (responsive-responsible-ethics of I-for-myself, I-for-the other, and other-for-me), operating in the human world. In accordance with Bakhtin and Vološinov, ideology is recognized as a constituent part of signs, which means to say that meaning develops in social interaction, in the action of signs in the world. Beyond their systemic function, the signs "skull" and "AIDS" reveal the signifying import of ideological function and context. Thus, language (verbal and nonverbal) is responsible for formulating meanings and transforming them into action which is historical, social and cultural. This is in the nature of signs: putting life into action and being put into action by life – "Significs".

Note

- 1. English translation reviewed by Evelyn Cristine Vieira.
- 2. When we refer to only one of the authors in the Bakhtin Circle we take the name as representative of the thinking found in works written by different members of the group. We do not intend to disregard the peculiarities of the works, but only to avoid redundancy in our writing. The Bakhtin Circle as a whole is dialogic: ideas circulate and develop among its members in interactive encounter which characterizes their philosophical method as undertaken in theory and action.
- 3. Site access for LIFE magazine: http://life.time.com/history/behind-the-picture-the-photo-that-changed-the-face-of-aids/#1. Access on July 12, 2012.

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